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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is prepared in response to the request contained in Commission on the Status of Women resolution 50/1. It includes information provided by Member States and relevant entities of the United Nations system and provides a recommendation for consideration by the Commission at its fifty-second session in 2008.

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I. Introduction

1. At its fiftieth session in 2006, the Commission on the Status of Women adopted resolution 50/1 on the release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts. In that resolution, the Commission expressed grave concern at the continuation of armed conflicts in many regions of the world and the human suffering and humanitarian emergencies they had caused. The Commission recognized that hostage-taking called for resolute, firm and concerted efforts on the part of the international community, in conformity with international humanitarian law and in accordance with international human rights standards, in order to bring such abhorrent practices to an end.

2. The Commission expressed its strong belief that the rapid and unconditional release of women and children taken hostage in areas of armed conflict would promote the implementation of the noble goals enshrined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action[1] and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly,[2] as well as the outcome document of the special session of the Assembly on children,[3] entitled "A world fit for children", including the provisions therein regarding violence against women and children.

3. The Commission strongly urged all parties to armed conflicts to respect fully the norms of international humanitarian law in armed conflict and to take all necessary measures for the protection of the civilian population as such, and to release immediately all women and children who had been taken hostage. The Secretary-General was requested to ensure the widest possible dissemination of all relevant material, in particular material relating to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), within existing resources.

4. All relevant international organizations were also requested to use their capabilities and undertake efforts to facilitate the immediate release of civilian women and children who had been taken hostage. The Commission also emphasized the importance of objective, responsible and impartial information, including sex-disaggregated data, on hostages, verifiable by relevant international organizations, in facilitating their release, and called for assistance to those organizations in that regard.

5. The Secretary-General was requested to submit to the Commission at its fifty-second session a report on the implementation of resolution 50/1, including relevant recommendations, taking into account the information provided by States and relevant international organizations. The present report is prepared in compliance with that request and is based on information received from six Member States, 12 entities of the United Nations system and one international organization.

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[1] *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annexes I and II.

[2] General Assembly resolutions S-23/2, annex, and S-23/2, annex.

[3] General Assembly resolution S-27/2, annex.

II. Information from Member States

6. The Governments of Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Lebanon and Yemen responded to the request to provide information regarding the status of implementation of resolution 50/1.

7. The Government of Azerbaijan emphasized that it remained strongly committed to the provisions of resolution 50/1. It supported the view that the rapid and unconditional release of women and children taken hostage in areas of armed conflicts would contribute considerably to the implementation of the goals outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and in the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. In order to find Azerbaijani missing persons and hostages and seek their release, the State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of War, Hostages and Missing Persons and its working group were established in 1993 by presidential decree. The State Commission's activity is guided by the norms and principles of international law, especially the Geneva Conventions of 1949, relevant resolutions of the Assembly and other documents adopted by United Nations human rights bodies. The Government reported that, as of 2007, 4,471 citizens of Azerbaijan had been declared missing, of whom 51 were children and 278 were women. A total of 1,391 people were released from Armenian captivity, of whom 168 were children and 343 were women. The Government of Azerbaijan indicated that it had at its disposal facts proving that 783 persons, including 18 children and 46 women, had been imprisoned or taken hostage by Armenia. The lists of these people were compiled on the basis of testimonials of citizens returned from captivity and from other sources.

8. The Governments of Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Lebanon and Yemen reported that the situation described in resolution 50/1 was not applicable to their respective countries, as they were not involved in armed conflict.

9. The Government of Bahrain further noted that the constitution and the National Action Charter of Bahrain forbid such actions and that it was party to numerous international conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, Convention against Torture and Other Forms of Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Arab Charter on Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

III. Information provided by entities of the United Nations system

10. Twelve entities of the United Nations system responded to the request to provide information regarding the status of implementation of resolution 50/1 with

information on their activities.[4] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) also provided information.

11. The Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Health Organization and IOM reported that they did not have any activities related to the implementation of resolution 50/1 during the reporting period 2006-2007.

12. Much of the information provided by the United Nations entities focused more generally on follow-up to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). Considerable information was provided on children abducted or taken hostage during armed conflict but little information was available on women taken hostage or imprisoned in armed conflicts.

13. The Department of Public Information issued a press release and produced a United Nations News Centre story at the time resolution 50/1 was adopted, in March 2006.

14. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) noted that the issue of women taken hostage due to armed conflict was important in the ESCWA region. ESCWA referred to its publication *Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women 2000-2006* (E/ESCWA/ECW/2007/technical paper.1), which highlighted the issue of Palestinian women held in Israeli prisons as a result of armed conflict and the impact of custody on their health and development. The report also stated that at least 10,500 Palestinians, including 319 children and 117 women, remained in Israeli custody in 30 detention facilities throughout Israel and in settlements and other military bases in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

15. The ESCWA Committee on Women focused on women and conflict during its sessions in 2006 and 2007. The third session of the Committee in 2007 resulted in several recommendations aimed at creating an enabling environment for protecting women in the contexts of war, hostage-taking and detention. The Committee recommended, inter alia, that protection and support should be provided for women living in conditions of insecurity, war and armed conflict and that programmes should be devised to support women, including in respect of legal aid, basic needs, relief and rehabilitation services, justice and reparations.

16. In the context of its life-saving and livelihood protection programmes to support vulnerable and war-affected civilian communities and displaced populations, the World Food Programme (WFP) supported, inter alia, education and health programmes, "catch-up" schools and vocational training for women. WFP indicated that it had increasingly engaged in assisting ex-combatants and their dependants in demobilization and reintegration efforts. Food rations were provided to programmes aimed at preventing the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as to

[4] The Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Public Information, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the World Food Programme, and the World Health Organization.

programmes for demobilization and reintegration of children affiliated with armed forces and groups. WFP pointed out that equal assistance had been given to children who had been forcibly recruited or abducted or who had entered the armed groups voluntarily.

17. In Uganda, WFP provided food rations, counselling and training to children who had been abducted. Orphans and girls who had become pregnant as a result of rape during abduction were also given assistance. WFP highlighted the challenges of protecting women and underage children from being taken hostage during armed conflict, including collection of reliable empirical data for reporting purposes, and ensuring a coordinated, multisectoral approach with the involvement of various actors.

18. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported on its assistance to women and children in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, the Sudan and Uganda. UNICEF prevention and assistance activities focused on dialogue with State and non-State actors to advocate the release of abducted children, capacity-building initiatives, including for community-based networks, and the creation of child-friendly spaces.

19. In 2006, UNICEF was involved in the peace talks based in southern Sudan between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and in planning for the transfer of up to 1,500 children and young women from the ranks of LRA. Since then, 70 children, 15 per cent of them girls, were returned from southern Sudan to reception centres in Gulu, Kitgum, Pader and Lira. In these areas, UNICEF deployed international child protection officers to ensure the care and protection of vulnerable children, including internally displaced persons, former abductees and children seeking safety at night in urban centres. UNICEF further developed inter-agency technical guidelines to secure the safe return and reintegration of women and children associated with LRA in southern Sudan. Faith-based organizations received support from UNICEF for lifesaving interventions during the movements of the children to the assembly areas in southern Sudan. In addition, UNICEF trained and deployed 20 social workers to the designated Assembly Areas and set up an inter-agency database to facilitate the provision of immediate care, family tracing and reunification. UNICEF also continued to support its child protection partner in Kitgum, Concerned Parents Association, in providing mentorship as well as life skills and conflict mitigation training to children who had been abducted and other vulnerable children from internally displaced persons camps.

20. In 2006, UNICEF supported the social and economic reintegration of 92 per cent of the targeted 10,000 demobilized children, either through informal skills training or formal education through the Community Education Investment Programme. In that process, 582 schools with a total student population of 85,867 have benefited from the educational and recreational materials provided by UNICEF. UNICEF also built the capacity of about 6,000 members of community-based support networks, such as child welfare committees, to facilitate the reintegration of demobilized children. At the same time, the border monitoring project worked to enhance child protection along the borders by building the capacity of communities to monitor, report and respond to the abduction and recruitment of children.

21. In 2006, in collaboration with partnering organizations, UNICEF facilitated the release of over 1,200 children from armed forces groups, as well as their reintegration into their communities. In northern Sudan, 211 children recruited into armed groups were released and reunited with their families during the year. In southern Sudan, 1,004 children were removed from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and from other armed groups and 500 of them were reunited with their families by the end of the year, as a result of family tracing by the southern Sudan family tracing network. In 2007, UNICEF worked with the Southern Sudan Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, along with Government and United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, to build local capacity for the demobilization of children associated with armed forces. To that end, UNICEF helped to train a child soldier identification and registration team in Bentiu and conducted a three-day family tracing and reunification workshop in Nyal, Unity State, for the expected demobilization of nearly 100 children from SPLA. Although UNICEF and the United Nations Mission in the Sudan have been in dialogue with other militias, such as the Sudan Liberation Army, no concrete steps have been taken to release children being held by the groups.

22. In order to protect vulnerable children and prevent their recruitment or re-recruitment into militias, UNICEF has provided training on livelihood opportunities to 400 adolescents and has created child-friendly spaces within internally displaced persons camps, thus allowing 183,000 children to access psychosocial support activities. UNICEF has also supported the training of 2,736 African Union Mission in the Sudan (AMIS) observers and police on child rights and protection within the inter-agency capacity-building programme for AMIS troops in Darfur. In 2007, UNICEF provided training to Save the Children social workers to care for 211 demobilized children and 200 vulnerable children in southern Kordofan.

23. In Côte d'Ivoire, UNICEF provided direct assistance (psychosocial, educational, medical, food assistance and family reintegration) to 7,188 children in 2006, more than 1,400 of whom had formerly been associated with armed groups, within the framework of the prevention, demobilization and reinsertion programme. At the same time, more than 6,000 adolescents associated with armed groups were sensitized on HIV/AIDS prevention and 20 child protection focal points were appointed and trained within the Forces de défense et de sécurités des Forces nouvelles (FDS-FN). Following UNICEF and United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire advocacy, decisive action plans were signed with FDS-FN and other militias to stop underage recruitment and to identify and demobilize all children in their ranks. In 2007, there was no further recruitment of children by armed groups. UNICEF further supported FDS-FN by setting up focal points within the militia, which resulted in the identification and registration of 204 children, including 84 girls.

24. In Somalia, UNICEF led a community and inter-agency child protection monitoring and reporting system in 2006 as a mechanism for investigating six egregious violations, pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). The results of the investigation by 30 trained monitors led to joint advocacy to address recruitment of children into militias. UNICEF noted, however, that the capacity of partners and community-based groups to monitor and respond to child protection violations remained limited and needed to be strengthened.

25. UNICEF continued to maintain a database on recruitment of children into armed groups in Sri Lanka, a proven effective advocacy tool for the release of underage recruits, and conducted negotiations and received individual commitments from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Karuna faction and the Government of Sri Lanka to develop appropriate action plans to enact recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Sri Lanka (S/2006/1006). In March 2007, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam developed an action plan in response to these efforts. The UNICEF country task force continued to negotiate to further improve its content and to secure commitment to respecting the criteria contained in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

26. In Sri Lanka, UNICEF also started child protection coordination meetings at the national and district levels in 2006 to address the issue of separated and unaccompanied children and the risks of recruitment and abduction by armed groups.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

27. **The present report is based on the responses of six Member States and inputs received from 12 entities of the United Nations system. Only one Member State provided information on women taken hostage or imprisoned in armed conflict. Much of the information provided by the United Nations focused more generally on follow-up to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). Little information was provided on the release of women taken hostage or imprisoned in armed conflict. Most information provided was focused on the support provided to children demobilized from situations of forced recruitment into armed forces. The Commission on the Status of Women may wish to invite the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict to take into account the release of children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts and provide sex-disaggregated data, where available, when preparing the reports requested by the General Assembly.**